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ABSTRACT

A proficiency examination developed for placing non-native English-speakers in appropriate expository writing courses is described. The instrument is a multiple-choice examination containing items that test specific expository writing skills through reading skills. The rationale for including such items for placement in expository writing courses, sample items, and psychometric information regarding test item validity and reliability are discussed. The use of the test in 1986-87 has resulted in better placement of students in expository writing courses and made it possible for the courses to meet the academic needs of non-native English-speaking students more efficiently. (MSE)

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Testing Skills in Expository Writing through Reading Comprehension

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This paper reports on a proficiency examination developed for placing non-native speakers of English in appropriate ESL expository writing courses. The instrument is a multiple choice examination containing items that test specific expository writing skills through reading skills. The rationale for including such items for placement in expository writing courses, sample items, and psychometric information regarding test item validity and reliability are discussed.

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The testing instruments used for placing students in ESL composition courses on the Green Bay and Milwaukee campuses of the University of Wisconsin often failed to provide appropriate information for the placement of these students. These testing instruments consisted of a standardized discreet item test and a personal response-to-a-topic writing sample which was holistically graded by ESL instructors. This system of placement had two principal weaknesses. The discreet item test measured students' knowledge of items in the language rather than their ability to function in the language or their specific composition skills. In addition, performance in composition writing did not seem to reflect accurately the students' knowledge of language structure. Therefore, students were often not as well-served as they might have been if they had been properly placed in the writing courses.

A placement test was needed to include not only an analytically evaluated writing sample but also an objective reading comprehension portion which would require the reader to analyze specific structural and rhetorical aspects of expository texts. This decision to test writing skills through reading comprehension was based on the premise that the ability to analyze the content and form of a written text was inextricably linked with the ability to write.

Rationale

Reading and writing skills have always been tested differently: reading comprehension evaluated objectively through discreet items and writing ability evaluated analytically and/or qualitatively. Differences in testing these two skills may be the result of reading and writing skills taught as individual subjects using different methods of teaching. However, reading comprehension and composing can be considered as integrated language skills, based on the premise that writers learn the techniques for composing through reading and readers learn the techniques for reading comprehension through composing.

In discussing the relationship between reading comprehension and writing skills, Widdowson (1978) points out that composition is not only writing sentences in a sequence but rereading what one has written and thinking about how to develop written discourse further. Therefore, writing proceeds by reference to the writer's interpretation and assessment of the reader's comprehension of what he has written. Likewise, reading comprehension is the ability not only to understand the meaning of sentences but also to actively interpret discourse beyond the sentence by predicting what is to come by referring to what has been written.

Furthermore, Smith (1983) maintains that conventions of writing are acquired by reading and that all good writers have read enough to have acquired the complexity of written discourse. In a survey of studies on the development of the writing ability of native English speakers, Krashen (1984) illustrates the relationship of reading and writing as similar reasoning processes. These studies indicate that increasing the amount of assigned reading and self-motivated reading for pleasure correlates with the development of writing skills and of quality in writing.

Purpose

The placement test in expository writing must distinguish good writers from weak writers in order to place students on different course levels. We define good writers in terms of the writing process: in planning of content and organization; in rescanning or rereading of the text during writing to review the plan of organization, to consider improvements, and to incorporate new ideas; and in revising with a focus on content and clarification of meaning.

Format

The placement test consists of a composition (60%) and multiple choice items (40%). In the composition portion, a problem situation is presented for which students choose a role and write a paragraph in response. For example, students prepare an argument for or against a nuclear weapons plant in the community. The argument must be consistent with the role chosen to adopt. This composition is analytically graded according to fluency or communication, relevancy or organization, mechanics of punctuation and spelling, choice of vocabulary, and grammatical structure of sentences. The objective portion tests for students' knowledge of cohesion and coherence in written discourse. Cohesion is tested through tasks in which students indicate their ability to relate linguistic elements within and between sentences using discourse devices. Coherence is tested by asking students to identify main and subordinate ideas or general and specific information in a paragraph.

Design of Items

In the items which test for cohesion within sentences, students must recognize discourse devices of conjunction for coordination and subordination of clauses. Students are given a problem which consists of two simple sentences. They must choose if possible combinations of the two sentences are structurally acceptable and meaningful.

Example item to test cohesion within sentences through joining coordinate and subordinate clauses.
Directions: Carefully read the pair of sentences in each problem below. How can these two sentences be combined in one sentence? Look at the list of possible ways to combine the two sentences of the problem. For each of the possible ways given, indicate whether the suggested sentence is correct (choose A) or incorrect (choose B). There may be more than one correct choice for each problem.

Problem: Mary chased a ball into the street. A car hit Mary.

1. When Mary was hit by a car, she chased a ball into the street.
* 2. Having chased a ball into the street, Mary was hit by a car.
3. Although Mary chased a ball into the street, she was hit by a car.
4. Since Mary chased a ball into the street; therefore, a car hit her.
5. In order for a car to hit Mary, she chased a ball into the street.
6. Because Mary chased a ball into the street, a car hit her.
* 7. Mary who chased a ball into the street was hit by a car.

In the items which test for cohesion between sentences, students must recognize discourse devices (reference and transition in syntax; reiteration and collocation in vocabulary). The task is to select a continuing sentence in discourse or determine sentence order or complete cloze items.

Example item to test cohesion between sentences by selection of a continuing sentence in discourse.
Directions: Choose the best sentence to continue the passage. Mark A, B, or C on the answer sheet.

The coati, a member of a New World family of medium-sized carnivores which includes the raccoon, is both popularly and scientifically among the least known and observed of our native mammals. _____

* A. There are a variety of reasons for this.
B. Both have facial masks and ringed tails.
C. In the United States, it roams a series of isolated mountain ranges in southern Arizona.

Example item to test cohesion between sentences by determining sentence order.
Directions: Choose the best order of sentences in the paragraph.

(1) Tapio is the ancient Finnish god of the forest, and this music is about the spirit of the endless Finnish woods and all the variety and mystery they contain. (2) In his last major work for orchestra, Tapiola, written in

1926, Sibelius penned one of the masterpieces of nature - descriptive music. (3) With Sibelius, we have a strong example of nature's role as both model and source of inspiration.

A. 3, 1, 2
B. 2, 3, 1
*C. 3, 2, 1
D. 1, 2, 3

Example item to test semantic cohesion between sentences by choosing present or past verb tenses for completion of an expository passage. Directions: Choose the most appropriate word for the blank. Mark A, B, C, or D on the answer sheet.

In 1952, the effects of the experimenter's outcome orientation, or bias, (1) _____by Wilson (1952), the physical scientist. Wilson (2) _____ that positive or expected data occur more often because of researchers' interest in the outcome of their experiments. Their expectancies about data (3) _____ in part the data obtained. This notion (4) _____ to Merton's (1948) concept of self-fulfilling prophecy. One prophesies an event, and then, the expectation of the event (5) _____the prophet's behavior in such a way as to make the predicted event more likely. Related, too, (6) _____ Heider's (1958) concept of "personal causality" and his discussion of the fulfillment of personal expectations.

1. A. considered
*B. were considered
C. are considered
D. considers

2. A. had found
B. is found
*C. found
D. has found

3. A. determined
*B. determine
C. is determined
D. had determined

4. A. related
B. has related
*C. is related
D. had related

5. A. was changed
B. has changed
C. changed
*D. changes

6. A. have been
B. were
C. had been
*D. are

In the items which test for coherence, students must indicate their ability to distinguish main and subordinate ideas or general and specific information within written discourse. The task is to recognize the topic sentence or general and specific information.

Example item to test for coherence by recognizing an assertion about the topic of the paragraph. The topic sentence must be distinguished from the other sentences which contain either more specific or unrelated information.
Directions: Choose for the blank the sentence which best expresses the topic of the paragraph. Mark A, B, or C on your answer sheet.

_____. While some of the new machines may save dying patients by leading to the proper choice of a treatment, an improper, untested use of these machines might lead to the wrong diagnosis, a mistake that could cost a patient's life. And for everyone, these machines will probably mean increased health care expenditure - some of them cost nearly one million dollars, not including supporting facilities, and require teams of specialists to operate them.

*A. Although new machines are giving physicians unprecedented power to understand the human body, they have drawbacks.
B. The widespread use of new machines by physicians may be costly in economic terms.
C. One result of heavy reliance on new machines might be the further loss of personal contact between doctor and patient.

Example item to test coherence by recognizing general information about the topic in the topic sentence. Other items request recognition of the correct list of main ideas or choice of sentences which give the most specific information about the topic.
Directions: Choose the support sentences which give the most general information about the topic.

(1) The bluebird, a member of the thrush family, is found only in North America, where it is divided into three species based on differences in color and differences in geographical distribution. (2) In each species, the males are more colorful than the females. (3) The male of the eastern species sports a bright blue back, blue tail feathers and a russet breast, and breeds from the Rocky Mountains to the Atlantic. (4) The western bluebird, marked by brownish feathers on parts of its back, lives from the west coast to the Rockies. (5) The mountain bluebird, all blue except for a whitish stomach, spreads as far north as Alaska. (6) Of the three, the eastern bluebird has suffered the most in recent years as its rural farm habitat has given way to highways, shopping centers, and subdivisions.

A. sentences 1 and 5
B. sentences 2 and 4
C. sentences 3 and 4
*D. sentences 2 and 6

Reliability

Field testing of items in the objective portion of the test was done in fall 1984 (N = 187), spring 1985 (N = 157), fall 1985 (N = 156), and spring 1986 (N = 246). To test reliability of items for the field tests given in fall 1984 and spring 1985, the scores of students in the upper 50% were compared with scores of students in the lower 50%. To test reliability of items of the field tests given in fall 1985 and spring 1986, the scores of students in the upper 25% were compared with scores of students in the lower 25%. The placement test began use in fall 1986 with the inclusion of additional dummy items for analysis in the fall 1986 and spring 1987 testings.

Validity

The objective portion of the test was given in fall 1985 to 26 native English speakers (M= 30.92, S. D. = 3.43) and 157 ESL students (M=26.51; S. D. = 5.17). The native English speakers did significantly better ($p < .01$) than the non-native English speakers (T = 2.97, d.f. = 90) For these 157 ESL students, the correlation of the objective portion of the placement test with their TOEFL scores (M = 530, S. D. = 51.53) has a coefficient of .68 with a probability level of .001. As the specific purpose is testing composition skills, 63 students' scores on the objective portion of the placement test (M= 64.35, S. D.= 13.32) in spring 1987 were correlated with teachers' evaluations of compositions on a scale of 1-4 (M = 2,48, S. D. = .86). The correlation coefficient is .66 with a probability level of .001.

Summary

The distinction between good and weak writers can be made in terms of the writing process through the use of items which test integrated reading and writing skills. The implementation of this placement test during the academic year of 1986-1987 has resulted in better placement of students in the expository writing courses which has enabled these courses to meet more efficiently the academic needs of ESL students.

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Note.
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